

EDITORIAL

Scientific literacy and public trust in science

Surveys attempting to obtain measurements of civic scientific literacy and public trust in science have been carried out in several countries, but not as yet in Sri Lanka. Although there is a general understanding that these two features of a society are multidimensional and that any numerical measure obtained needs to be interpreted with caution, there is no general agreement on the extent and manner in which scientific literacy impacts on the nature of public trust in science.

Public trust in science can exist without a high level of scientific literacy, due to the appreciation of the positive applications of science-based technologies which the public comes in contact with as individuals, in almost all aspects of their daily lives. Thus, the thematic content for the programme initiated by the National Academy of Sciences Sri Lanka (NASSL) on rebuilding trust in science is ‘How science/scientists generate wealth for the nation’.

However, public opinion based only on trust without scientific literacy can be manipulated to obtain support for irrational and polarized positions on controversial issues by appealing to the inherent biases of individuals. In contrast, public opinion based on trust grounded in an understanding of the processes involved in the creation of scientific knowledge, as well as an acquaintance with basic scientific facts and theories will be more robust and less susceptible to manipulation.

The National Science Foundation (NSF) and the Sri Lanka Association for the Advancement of Science (SLAAS) are two of the leading organizations in Sri Lanka that have been involved over the years, in activities which would serve to enhance civic science literacy. It is evident that the NASSL has recognized the importance of scientific literacy in the development of public trust in science, by supporting and collaborating with the ‘Popularization of Science’ programme of the SLAAS, as a component of its effort at rebuilding trust in science.

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